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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study examined the role of language, discrimination, and aspirations in the school success of Latino students in a small rural town. The town, located about 1,000 miles from Mexico and about 200 miles from any sizeable Latino community, contains about 200 Latinos. Almost all are Mexicans or Mexican Americans and have come to work at a local meat processing plant. About 50 Latino children attend local schools; 20-40 percent have limited English proficiency, but many of the rest have trouble with academic English. Observations concerning Latino attitudes toward community and schools, family life, acculturation, language usage and attitudes, community attitudes toward Latinos, school treatment of Latino students, and educational aspirations demonstrate that Latinos in this town share linguistic and cultural patterns with other U.S. Latinos and have similar educational aspirations. They live in a different social environment, however, and suffer less discrimination, leading researchers to expect greater school success. Unexpectedly, Latino outcomes have been influenced by a longstanding local Anglo pattern of female student success and male student failure. Apparently, Latinos have picked up and intensified this pattern because of factors peculiar to their situation: Latino sex role patterns and working-class stereotypes of male behavior. The findings illustrate the context-dependent character of Latino school success. Contains 21 references. (SV)

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Language, Identity and Educational Success: An Ethnographic Study of Spanish-Speaking Children in Rural America

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In general, U.S. schools have not succeeded in educating Mexican-American students. Although there are many individual successes, Mexican-Americans as a group disproportionately remain below grade level, drop out of high school, and fail to finish college (Losey, 1995). This lack of educational success has been explained in various ways. Valdés (1996) classifies the various explanations according to the level of analysis they rely on: *interactional* misunderstandings caused by linguistic or cultural differences between Latinos and Anglos; *macrosocial* forces that exclude Latinos from the mainstream; and Latinos' own *psychological* attitudes that keep them from succeeding. For organizational purposes, this paper relies on a similar three-part classification of explanations for Latino school failure—accounts which rely on linguistic and cultural differences, systematic differential treatment, or lowered aspirations.

Some argue that Spanish-dominant children—even those who have mastered English grammar and vocabulary—*use* language in a different way (García & Carrasco, 1981), and that these differences in conversational style interfere with their performance in the classroom (which is generally evaluated using mainstream Anglo norms). Some argue that Mexican-Americans are treated differently, because of their ethnicity, both in and outside of the classroom (Díaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Foley, 1990), and that this differential treatment makes school success less likely. Finally, MacLeod (1995), Fine (1986), and Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) argue that disadvantaged students more often have lowered aspirations—in some cases because the students live among others with lowered aspirations, and in some cases because of realistic assessments of their life chances—and that these lowered aspirations limit their success in school.

In order to assess the relative importance of these three factors, we need to examine cases in which the factors vary quasi-independently. Most research on Mexican-American school success, however, has been done in similar social environments: either in largely Hispanic neighborhoods, or among migrant worker communities, in relatively Latino-dense areas. The rural Spanish-speaking community described in this study ("Havertown"[1]) offers a contrast case, because it is hundreds of miles away from any sizable Latino community.

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[1]All names and many identifying details have been changed.

Examining school success in this context might help illuminate the role of language, discrimination, and aspirations in the general school success of Mexican-Americans. One might see Havertown as a neat test case that would isolate the factors crucial to Latino school failure. Havertown Latinos preserve linguistic and cultural traditions similar to those reported in Latino-dense areas, but in an environment with less overt discrimination than elsewhere. I had hoped originally to find higher aspirations and school success among the Havertown Latinos, and to conclude that discrimination must then be the key factor in Latino school failure.

As this paper reports, it turns out that things are not so simple. The culturally isolated Latinos in Havertown do provide an interesting contrast that we can learn from, but they do not generate neat solutions to the broad question about Latino school failure. To understand the significance of the three factors in this particular case, we must see how they interact with complexes of other factors. Perhaps I should have expected this, given that Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995), Valdés (1996), and Vásquez, Pease-Alvarez and Shannon (1994) insist that single-factor accounts cannot explain Latino school failure. In Havertown, it turns out that two other factors make a substantial difference to Latino school success as well: gender, and educational aspirations in the surrounding Anglo community. Long before Latinos arrived, local schools had a pattern of female student success and male student failure. Latinos, it seems, have picked up and even intensified this pattern—because of factors peculiar to their situation. In describing this, the paper first provides ethnographic background on the Havertown Latino community. Then it describes the role of language, discrimination, and aspirations in the experience of Latino schoolchildren. And, finally, it discusses the pattern of gender differences that has developed.

Ethnographic background

In conducting this study my assistants and I have used ethnographic and discourse analytic methods. Together with two native Spanish-speaking research assistants, I have observed classes and bilingual tutoring sessions at four Havertown schools since the spring of 1996. We have interviewed both teachers and students, and visited Spanish-speaking families in their homes. Our observations and interview questions focus on community members' use

of Spanish and comfort with English, the discrimination they face, and their aspirations. We aim to understand their social situation, and how their isolation affects them. We have explored their attitudes toward school, and their feelings about the school system. We have also begun to gather two sorts of recorded conversation, which we are analyzing using discourse analytic methods developed recently in linguistic anthropology (Silverstein, 1984; Wortham, 1996; Wortham and Locher, 1996). First, we are conducting several life-history interviews with community members. Having people tell their life histories is one way to explore their aspirations and their sense of themselves. Beginning in the fall of 1997 we also plan to record some class sessions that include Spanish-speaking students. The results reported in this paper, however, draw primarily on the ethnographic data.

This ethnographic research is taking place in a small rural American town ("Havertown") a thousand miles from Mexico, and a couple of hundred miles from any sizable Latino community. About 200 Latinos, mostly from Mexico or Southern Texas, live in Havertown (a few residents come from Guatemala, El Salvador, or Puerto Rico, but the vast majority are Mexican or Mexican-American). Virtually all of the adults have come to work at a local meat processing plant. Turnover is very high, as families regularly leave town for other jobs or to return south. At any given time, about 50 Latino children are enrolled in the local schools (2-3% of the total school population). On average there are four or five Latinos, out of about 150 students, in each grade. Between 20 and 40% of the Latino students test as "limited English proficient," and many of the rest have trouble with academic English. All Latino students attend mainstream classes, but many are pulled out of one or two classes a day in order to work in the ESL room (each school has an ESL room with a permanent staff member).

Latino schoolchildren have mixed feelings about life in Havertown. On arrival they usually suffer culture shock at being transplanted into a community so devoid of Latinos. One teacher reports spending many hours in her ESL room with new students—often in tears—who refuse even to leave the room for fear of the totally Anglo world of the school. The students miss their Spanish-speaking friends, and Spanish language radio (although many families do have satellite dishes and watch Univision). Due to the lack of friends, relatives and familiar activities they often find rural American life sterile and boring. The transience

of Latino families also takes a toll. Stull, Broadway, and Erickson (1992) report that the turnover of workers in this sort of meatpacking job can be 6-8% a *month*, and turnover in Havertown approaches this at times. Even children from families resident for several years often speculate that they will be leaving soon, and this expectation disrupts their commitments to school and friends. Many families also leave temporarily, usually during the school year, in order to visit relatives down south. This inevitably disrupts the students' schooling.

On the other hand, many students and their parents appreciate the quality of the schools—which they find far better than those in southern Texas or rural Mexico. Some parents remain at extremely difficult jobs just so their children can finish school in Havertown. Many students and their parents also value the lack of drugs and gang violence (and so do urban judges, who sometimes send juvenile offenders for rehabilitation). Children and adolescents report that they feel safe here, and parents worry less about the bad influences their children might fall under. The primary reason for these Latinos' presence in Havertown, however, is work. As described comprehensively by Griffith and Kissam (1995), recent changes in farm mechanization and a partial breakdown in job-finding networks have disrupted the migration patterns of many agricultural workers. These workers value a *steady* job above all else (one long-time worker told me, when I asked whether the jobs were good: "well, they're not good jobs, but there are lots of hours"). From a mainstream U.S. point of view, the Havertown jobs are exhausting, dirty, low-paying, and exploitative. But workers get steady work and ample overtime year-round, and there is no shortage of new applicants.

Latino families in Havertown vary widely in their degree of Americanization. Some follow the typical Mexican pattern (Rothenberg, 1995; Valdés, 1996). The Villalobos family provides an example. This family has been in Havertown for over five years. All the children were born in Mexico, although the two youngest have lived most of their lives in the U.S. All the Villalobos children show great respect for their parents. My assistants and I have observed the oldest son Jesús, who at the time had a broken arm, leap up to take out the garbage for his mother when he saw her about to do it. When the daughters see their father coming home from work, they rush inside to set the table and lay out dinner. The older boy also enforces traditional Mexican values among his younger siblings: we have seen him severely discipline his younger sister and her boyfriend for kissing, and he regularly insists

that everyone speak only Spanish in the house.

Most telling, however, is the Villalobos family attitude toward money. The older children give every dollar they earn (which sometimes comes to several hundred dollars a week) directly to their mother, for the maintenance of the family. If they want money to go out, they ask her for some. The whole family works toward the goal of saving enough to buy a house in Mexico. In another non-Americanized family, one adolescent daughter works full time and sends virtually every dollar back to her brother in Mexico, to support his courtship. Other Havertown Latinos, however, are more Americanized. Some adolescents give half their pay to the family, while others keep everything for themselves. In several Americanized families, children often demand and get $100 pairs of sneakers and designer clothes. One family is well-known for its enormous credit card debt—which comes from expensive clothes and other consumer habits.

Language, Discrimination, and Aspirations in Havertown

Jesús Villalobos illustrates many of the issues faced by Latino boys in Havertown schools. When we first met Jesús, he pretended not to understand much English. It turns out, however, that he was hoping we would say something in front of him, in English, that he might find useful. He eventually conceded that he speaks excellent conversational English, although he prefers Spanish whenever possible. Jesús can also do surprisingly well on English grammar worksheets when he tries—although this does not happen very often (he fails most of his classes due to lack of effort). In general, he does not display English literacy skills adequate for good high school work. Jesús is extremely personable and gets along well with most of his classmates. He spends more time with the "burnouts" than the "jocks" (Eckert, 1989), but most everyone knows him and appreciates his humor. Despite his popularity, however, Jesús confides in private that he has no "real friends" among Anglos. He also occasionally fights with Anglo boys—especially the "poor white trash" who, he claims, hate Latinos. We remember Jesús best for his irreverent attitude toward school. On one occasion he appeared, somewhat out of breath, at the door of the ESL room, when he had just been in a closed, teacher-supervised lunch period. He said, "Paco didn't make it out"—as if the lunch period were a place, like jail, to be escaped. Jesús also has a trademark

exit: whenever he leaves a room, he flicks the lights on and off. In the ESL room, the flick lasts a while. I once observed him leave the main office, and he dared to flick those lights too—but very quickly. In general, Jesús has fun in school with his close Latino friends, and with a few teachers, but he does not do much schoolwork. He works as many hours at the plant as possible, even if that means skipping school regularly.

Overall, the Havertown Latino students vary widely in their English literacy skills. Almost all the families speak Spanish at home, and only an occasional Texan speaks better English than Spanish. Jesús is in the middle of the continuum, although he is unusually adamant about speaking English only when necessary. Some students have only arrived recently from Mexico, and speak little English. Others have grown up in the U.S., read English perfectly, and regularly make the honor roll. Most, however, speak good conversational English but show the sorts of deficits in academic literacy described by Gennessee (1994) and others. Virtually all these students have experienced, and many still experience, shame at making errors in English. Many students are too embarrassed to speak English, even in front of their own family members. One girl joined her family in the U.S. after many years of separation, and she froze up when asked to speak English by her more fluent little sister. Even more serious problems occur when students hide their needs and don't ask for help in school, pretending that they command more English than they do. So Havertown Latinos are generally Spanish-dominant, and show predictable deficits in their English literacy. In this respect, they are like many of their compatriots elsewhere in the U.S.

In Latino-dense areas of the U.S., Anglo resentment of Latinos can be strong (Trujillo, 1996). One can see this in recent initiatives like Proposition 187 in California, and the English-only movement. In less Latino-dense areas, however, Anglos often do not feel as threatened. Stull, Broadway, and Erickson (1992) describe a community similar to Havertown, where Anglos do not see Latinos as serious competition for resources. In such communities Latinos do what local Anglos see as dirty but necessary work, which Anglos would not do themselves. Havertown Anglos generally see the Latinos as hard-working, and have substantial sympathy for the difficult conditions they work under. In fact, Anglo sympathy has reached such proportions that it threatens to be a problem. Havertown Latinos have become a "charity magnet," with many Anglo groups vying to do things for them—from

health care to food and clothing donations to tutoring to legal assistance. This makes most of the Latinos uncomfortable, and they want to be left alone. But a few, especially male adolescents, openly resent the implication that they need charity. We have heard some worry: "what do people think of us?" And one adolescent got into a fight at school with an Anglo who had said, "when I grow up I'm going to help out you Latinos." Before starting the fight, the Latino's response was something like: "I don't need your help; I make more in a week at the plant than you make in a month flipping burgers." In our judgment much of the Anglo sympathy is genuinely felt, if at times self-serving, but it has nonetheless caused some problems.

In interviews, Havertown Anglos do reveal several stereotypes about Latinos—as exotic, as dirty, as violent, as having huge families, as all being illegal immigrants. One hears occasional mutterings about how "Proposition 187 had the right idea." More common than this sort of overtly hostile sentiment are thoughtless acts. For instance, in an elementary school unit about Hawaii we observed an Anglo student say, "I could be a Hawaiian." The teacher responded by pointing to the one black and one Latino student, and saying "no, you're too white, these are the only two who could be Hawaiians." Another teacher decided to go around the class and have each student say what his or her parents did. We could see the Latino students squirming uncomfortably long before their turns, because they were ashamed to compare their parents' occupations to the others'. While such instances may be uncommon, they can nonetheless have serious effects. These are balanced, however, by teachers' much more common efforts to accommodate Latinos and on some occasions to celebrate their ethnic background as an educational resource. We have seen many classes eagerly learning Spanish vocabulary about a current topic, with the Latino students as experts. School administrators report that many local parents, as well, request for their children to be placed in classes with Latinos, because the parents expect their children will benefit from the exposure. In general, then, Havertown Latinos *are* marked as different. But Latino adults and children overwhelmingly report *less* discrimination in Havertown that they have experienced elsewhere in the U.S. Our observations confirm this.

Teachers' attempts to accommodate Latino students are not always a good thing, however. Too often, well-intentioned modification of schoolwork leads Latino children to

coast without pushing themselves (relying exclusively on Spanish translations of schoolwork long after they need to, for instance). Many teachers also feel unprepared for and overwhelmed by the needs of ESL students. Many ignore monolingual Latino children because they cannot communicate with them, and simply try to "keep them busy." Others try to involve them, but end up simply telling the Latino students what to say when other students get impatient. Monolingual Latinos spend about one-quarter of their time in the ESL rooms, and often get special Spanish-language assignments in class, which are reviewed by the ESL teacher. But in class they rarely interact with peers and often daydream. We observed one Latino student whose inability to write in cursive went unnoticed for well over a year after the class had learned this skill. Some Latino students learn enough English to interact with peers and do mainstream assignments, and these often do good academic work. But others can remain unintentionally marginalized, sometimes for years.

Latino educational aspirations in Havertown vary widely. Family and student aspirations do not seem to correlate with degree of Americanization. Some families follow the pattern described in some literature (Gallimore and Goldenberg, 1993; Griffith and Kissam, 1995), with even uneducated parents highly valuing education for their children. Some push their children hard to do homework, and enlist older children to tutor siblings. A few, however, distrust educated people, and see little value in education. One family insisted that their 16 year old daughter work in the plant instead of going to school, despite protests from the schools. Another made fun of two children enrolled in college, claiming that they were "wasting their lives." We have also observed the mismatch Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) and Valdés (1996) describe between communal Mexican values and the individualist ones embodied in U.S. schools. Many Havertown Latinos value loyalty and reciprocity more than individual school success, and this sometimes leads them to ignore school obligations in favor of work or family trips. Even the most academically successful students tend to make college plans only with the understanding that they will be able to live with or near their family, and that they will use their own social advancement primarily to better the family.

Gender and Aspirations

In general, then, Havertown Latinos share linguistic and cultural patterns with their compatriots elsewhere in the U.S., and they have similar educational aspirations. They live in a different social environment, however, and suffer less discrimination. If only they were all academically successful, we might conclude that discrimination plays the predominant role in U.S. Latino school failure. In fact, however, academic success among Havertown Latinos splits along gender lines. Before adolescence, Latino boys and girls do relatively well in school, except for monolingual speakers who get marginalized in class (as discussed above). But in middle school boys and girls diverge. Almost all the girls continue to be committed to school, most do relatively well, and many go on to college. On the other hand, few of the boys even graduate high school. This gender difference cannot be attributed to language skills, as there are many English-fluent boys. Nor can the bulk of it be attributed to discrimination. Male Latino adolescents are sometimes stereotyped as violent in Havertown, but not generally. The gender difference is best explained as a matter of aspirations: boys do not see education as central to their future status, while many girls do.

In general, gender roles are more clearly defined among rural Mexicans than among mainstream Anglos (Rothenberg, 1995). We have observed similar patterns in Havertown: boys congregate outside the house, and have few responsibilities until they are old enough to earn money; girls mostly stay inside the house, and are responsible for many household chores. Virtually all the girls go inside in the late afternoon to help prepare dinner, and even the adventurous scurry in at the first sign of their father coming home. On one occasion the Villalobos family had a birthday party for Jesús, during which his mother had a bible reading before the meal. Only women and girls were present at the ceremony, however, because Jesús and all the men were outside drinking beer. In another family, eleven and twelve year old sons were allowed outside to drink beer at night, while eighteen year old daughters were forbidden from going outside after dinner. The separation between male and female adolescents is very sharp: male and female ethnographers spent months building close relationships with same-gender Latinos, but hardly knew members of the opposite gender. Close siblings of opposite genders will talk in the house, but often ignore each other in public.

Adolescent boys rarely value school. Those few that do hide their good grades, and brag about their occasional failures, to avoid being stigmatized as a "school-boy" or "mama's boy." We have observed no similar peer pressure among the girls. Some girls, in fact, enjoy lording their academic success over their brothers. In one family we observed three sisters who had a pool going over how many classes their brother would fail that term. The parents allowed this, and even concurred occasionally when the girls called their brother "the dumb one." The brother responded by trying to be "cool"—drinking, acquiring more gang paraphernalia, etc. These differential biases against school are further reinforced because the Latino peer group appears more important to the boys than the girls. Boys always have Latino best friends, and rarely Anglo friends at all. Girls more often list Anglos as good friends from school, although they rarely socialize with these friends outside of school activities.

This gender difference in school aspirations and success matches a long-standing Anglo pattern in Havertown. High school teachers often complain that upper-track classes are overwhelmingly female, and worry about how to reach the boys. On one recent occasion, all top ten students at the high school were female. This was not considered that unusual. But the administration was sufficiently disturbed that they moved student number eleven, a boy, into a "tie" for tenth. In high school classrooms girls are much more often attentive and conscientious, while even upper-middle class boys show less interest in school. Teachers explain this male tendency partly as a pragmatic issue: boys see themselves as doing physical labor, or as taking over their father's business, and they do not need to go to college for this; girls, on the other hand, realize that even secretaries and medical assistants need some educational credentials (Ready [1991] describes a similar gender difference among Latino adolescents in Washington, D.C.). It is also a matter of working class stereotypes of males: academically successful boys cannot be "tough," and even middle class boys want to be tough. For whatever reason, academically successful Havertown girls do not thereby adopt an undesirable social identity, while academically successful boys do. Although teachers do genuinely lament this gender difference, they also sometimes implicitly sanction it. We have observed teachers quite often praising girls for their academic work, while they praise boys most often for their social skills or athletic accomplishments.

Why have Havertown Latinos recreated and intensified this Anglo gender difference in educational aspirations? We have no definite answers at this point, but we offer two speculations. While Mexican girls might be more sequestered than their brothers in Mexico, there at least they have family networks and activities to make their lives less sterile. In Havertown, Latino girls have nothing to do but schoolwork and chores. They also observe the surrounding Anglo culture, in which women have comparatively greater chances for advancement through education. And because they face less discrimination in Havertown than in other parts of the U.S., many girls are able to see school as a route to escape from their monotonous lives. They have available the model of Anglo girls who work hard and hope to succeed through education, and they can see themselves doing the same. Like Latino adolescents elsewhere in the U.S. (Griffith and Kissam, 1995; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 1995), these girls and their families hope that they will not have to do the same menial labor as their parents. Because of lowered discrimination and positive female models, Havertown Latinas often see school as a way to accomplish this.

Latino boys, however, do not have the same positive Anglo model available. Local Anglo boys are more often concerned with machismo than school success. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) describe how more Americanized Latinos can have their school aspirations corrupted by Anglo adolescents' ambivalence toward school. In Havertown we observe this pattern only among adolescent males. Like their Anglo counterparts, the Latino boys see opportunities for making substantial money through physical labor or with their mechanical skills. The more Americanized are drawn strongly to the idea of their own money and a car—ideally a "low rider" pickup truck—while the less Americanized see an opportunity to make money now to help their family. The Latino boys are also more sensitive to the discrimination that does exist in Havertown. Perhaps because they bear most of it, or perhaps because male minority-group members are more prone to see macro-level discriminatory patterns in society (cf. Weis and Fine, 1996), they are less willing than females to concentrate on schoolwork and ignore the discrimination.

Where does this leave us, then, in explaining disproportionate Latino school failure? Following Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) and Valdés (1996), we must conclude that simple one-factor accounts do not suffice. U.S. Latinos' educational experiences are

complex, with language, discrimination, aspirations, gender, and surrounding Anglo aspirations all playing a role. This paper shows how these factors interact in one particular case, both to illustrate the context-dependent character of Latino school success and to provide a contrast that might illuminate the experiences of other U.S. Latinos.

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